

Item 2

SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

AREA 4 FORUM

Hackworth Suite,
Shildon Sunnydale
Leisure Centre,
Shildon.

Tuesday,
18th November 2003

Time : 6.30 p.m.

Present: Councillor D.M. Hancock (Sedgefield Borough Council) (Chairman) and

PC. S. Cowan	- Durham Constabulary
M. Straugheir	- Durham Constabulary (Traffic Management)
Councillor H. Robinson	- Eldon Parish Council
Councillor J.G. Huntington	- Sedgefield Borough Council
Councillor G.M.R. Howe	- Sedgefield Borough Council
Councillor Mrs.I. Jackson Smith	- Sedgefield Borough Council
Councillor J.M. Smith	- Sedgefield Borough Council
Councillor Mrs. L. Goldie	- Shildon Town Council
Councillor M. Stott	- Shildon Town Council
M. Quigley	- SPICE

In I. Brown, Mrs. G. Garrigan and G. Scanlon

Attendance: (Sedgefield Borough Council)

Apologies: Councillor Mrs. L. Smith (Sedgefield Borough Council)
PC. A. Lawton (Durham Constabulary),
D. Bowles and K. Vasey (Sedgefield Primary Care Trust)

AF(4).20/03 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23rd September 2003 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman. (For copy see file of Minutes).

AF(4).21/03 POLIC REPORT

PC. Simon Cowan was present at the meeting to give details of the crime statistics.

It was reported that Shildon Officers had responded to 283 logged incidents during the past four weeks, of which 18 related to youth complaints and 14 to domestic violence.

Specific reference was made to incidents of vandalism to cars. It was noted that 12 sets of tyres had been slashed and the windows of 6 cars had been smashed.

With regard theft, the Forum was given details of items that had been stolen, which included 3 unattended pedal cycles, handbag stolen from

church, games console from house in Jubilee Road, and radiators and boiler from a yard in Eldon

It was also noted that during the period there had been 3 cars stolen, (2 had been recovered by Shildon Officers on patrol)

2 motorcycles stolen, 3 assaults, 2 dwellinghouse burglaries, 1 attempted burglary on a garage and an attempted burglary on a jewellers shop.

During the period, officers from the Shildon Police Office had arrested 25 people.

Specific reference was made to the fact that the Rural Beat Team had recently been based in Shildon, and had found the town a pleasant place to work in, and had praised the behaviour of its youths.

The Forum was also informed that the Police intended in the near future to replace and use the CCTV equipment on the vacant mast in Coronation Avenue, Shildon.

AF(4).22/03 TRAFFIC CALMING – ELDON/OLD ELDON

It was reported that residents in Old Eldon were concerned regarding the speed at which vehicles travelled through Old Eldon and Eldon and felt that the existing 60 m.p.h. speed limit in Old Eldon was inappropriate.

It was also pointed out that the carriageway was narrow, with no footpaths and many of the residents in Old Eldon had driveways leading directly onto the road. Residents in the area wanted the speed limit reducing and the Police to regularly monitor the speeds of motorists by the use of mobile cameras and the speed visor.

Reference was also made to the staggered crossroads, and the poor visibility splay for motorists travelling from Shildon.

M. Straugheir, Durham Constabulary Traffic Management reported that it was not possible to reduce the speed limit through Old Eldon as the road did not qualify under the existing criteria laid down in the Speed Management Strategy relating to urbanisation, however, further guidance was expected from the Government which could change the criteria. He pointed out that several improvements had already been made at Old Eldon with regard to traffic calming, including the provision of rumble strips, carriageway markings, the provision of high visibility yellow back signs and bollards to delineate the edge of the carriageway Vertical traffic calming features such as speed humps, were inappropriate in view of the fact that it was a "C" road and the nature of the traffic that used it. Consideration was, however, being given to locating the mobile speed visor sign in Old Eldon/Eldon and erection of new signage.

It was queried how Redworth qualified for a 40 m.p.h. speed limit. It was reported that the road through Redworth was Class "A" and was far more urbanised than Old Eldon.

M. Straugheir agreed that he would make arrangements to view the stretch road in question, accompanied by local residents and Durham County Council's Area Traffic Engineer.

AF(4).23/03 DELIVERING THE PREFERRED OPTION – LARGESCALE VOLUNTARY TRANSFER

I. Brown from Sedgefield Borough Council's Housing Department attended the meeting to give a presentation regarding the above.

The Forum was reminded that Sedgefield Borough Council at its meeting on 12th September 2003 had agreed that Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) was the preferred option for the future delivery of the ownership and management of the Council's housing. It was explained that in order to deliver that option, the Council had submitted its option appraisal study for formal 'signing off' to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on 9th October 2003 and would submit an expression of interest for the 2004 LSVT Round by mid-November 2003, with the full application being submitted by mid-December 2003. It was pointed out that access to the 'Transfer Round' was 'selective', based upon a range of factors, however no authority had yet been refused access to the round.

It was reported that the Transfer Guidance, issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, set out 21 key data requirements that needed to be included in the application form. The information required included:

- Decent Homes Delivery Plan.
- Value for Money Assessment of LSVT.
- Details of how tenants would be involved in the development of the LSVT proposal.
- Demand information.
- Details on how the LSVT would contribute to wider regeneration.
- Corporate impact assessment, including a change management plan.
- Details on how the Council would deliver its strategic and statutory housing functions.
- Details on how the new landlord would be chosen and how tenants would be involved.
- Liaison details with the Housing Corporation on the transfer.

- Details on how the transfer would strengthen tenant participation arrangements.
- Investment plan for Asset Management standard.
- Details of the programme of Best Value Reviews that would be undertaken post transfer.
- Details of a rent restructuring plan and the transfer price.
- Details of monitoring arrangements for the delivery of promises to tenants.
- Details of proposed use of the useable receipt.

The Council would be notified in March 2004 on whether it had gained access to the 2004 LSVT Round. If it had gained access, transfer must take place by March 2006. The average timescale for a transfer was twelve to eighteen months from being given access to the round. Formal consultation on the transfer could not begin until confirmation on access to the LSVT Round had been received.

The role of the Borough Councillors in delivering the preferred option would be to monitor the development and delivery of the project and ensure that the Council influenced and informed the development of the new landlord and its business plans.

Borough Councillors would also be chosen to represent the Council on the Shadow Board and subsequently the full Board of the new landlord, and would monitor the delivery of promises made to tenants.

It was pointed out that the Council would need to formally appoint an Independent Tenants Adviser and financial consultants and develop a business plan for the next thirty years that would include investment details. A contract between the Council and the new landlord would need to be developed, as well as a new Tenancy Agreement and formal offer to the tenants.

With regard to the choice of type of landlord, it was noted that the Council could choose from the following:

- A local housing company that was identifiable as part of Sedgefield Borough.
- Not for profit Company.
- Charitable organisation.
- Industrial Provident Society.

The landlord could also be part of an existing group structure or part of a larger group where the stock would be absorbed or a “stand alone” independent Sedgefield Borough based Local Housing Company.

It was noted that prior to the tenants being balloted, extensive consultation must be undertaken if a successful outcome was to be achieved. The consultation would involve the issue of newsletters, public meetings, the setting up of a mobile exhibition unit showing the types of work to be undertaken, and front line staff briefings.

It was pointed out that tenants would receive a copy of the offer document prior to the ballot, taking place. The offer document would contain promises on tenants’ rights, rents, repairs and improvements, representation and regeneration. The promises must be deliverable and progress must be monitored. The actual ballot would be independently run and a simple majority of tenants voting was required for the transfer to proceed.

It was explained that if the Council retained ownership of its housing stock and continued to be responsible for the delivery of the full housing service, it would have sufficient resources to meet the ‘Decent Homes Standard’ by 2010, however not sufficient to deliver the levels of investment identified in the Council’s Stock Condition Survey, which went beyond the minimum of Decent Homes to an Assets Management Standard. Stock retention would not attract any additional Government resources and would result in limiting the Council’s ability to contribute to the wider regeneration agenda for the Borough.

Issues were raised by the Forum on a number of areas, including the impact on rents, repairs and tenants’ rights.

It was explained that rents were now controlled by the Government Rent Restructuring Policy, and they would converge with Housing Association rents by 2012.

The repairs service would continue and levels of capital investment would be significantly enhanced, allowing the delivery of the asset management investment requirements of the housing stock.

The Chairman thanked Ian Brown for attending the meeting and his interesting presentation.

AF(4).24/03 COUNCIL’S HOUSING ALLOCATION AND MANAGEMENT PROCEDURES

Graham Scanlon from the Council’s Housing Management Section attended the meeting to give a presentation on the above.

It was explained that since 1992 the Council had operated a points based letting system, however, with the introduction of the Homelessness Act in February 2003 and the release of the Code of Guidance on Allocation of Accommodation for Local Authorities, it had been necessary to review the policy to take account of issues within the Act. A new policy had, therefore,

been agreed by the Council's Cabinet at its meeting on 16th October 2003, to be implemented in March/April 2004.

The key changes were as follows:

- Persons between 16 and 18 years old would be accepted on the waiting list, if in priority need. It was explained that where persons were deemed to be in priority need under the terms of the Homelessness Act 2002, they would be approved and allocated accommodation in conjunction with the Council's joint protocol with Durham County Council's Social Services and DART, which aimed to provide support to young people.
- Council tenants would be eligible to transfer after six months tenancy of their existing property, subject to their tenancy having been conducted in a satisfactory manner.
- The age restriction for family accommodation was to be lowered to 18 years.
- Applicants from outside Sedgefield Borough would be eligible to apply for Council housing, however, preference would be given to existing tenants of the Borough.
- Applicants who had met the accepted criteria would be considered on medical and social needs grounds against the statutory and Council criteria for such assessment where appropriate.
- The existing exclusions policy would be removed and an ineligibility policy adopted. Under the new guidance, a person could only be made ineligible for rehousing if his/her behaviour was such that had he/she been an existing tenant of the Council, the Council would have been able to obtain an Immediate Possession Order as a result of that behaviour.

The Forum was informed that applicants for rehousing from Schedule 1 offenders would be considered on the basis of a joint assessment with the Police, Probation Services, Social Services, Health professionals and other relevant bodies. Regard would be given to the guidance issued by the Department of Transport and the Regions in November 1999.

With regard to requests for housing transfers, it was explained that following the receipt of an application from an existing tenant to transfer, arrangements would be made for a Local Housing Officer to visit the tenant's property. The Officer would check the condition of both the property and the garden and the tenants' rent account. A decision would then be made on whether the tenant was eligible to transfer. If the condition of the garden or the property was considered unsatisfactory, the tenant would be requested to rectify all items before he/she could transfer. It was, however, pointed out that there were exceptional cases when transfer was allowed without the above criteria being met. For example, when it was particularly difficult for the

applicant to remain in his/her accommodation in view of the risk of assault or sexual attack, harassment, domestic violence etc.

With regard to estate surveillance, it was reported that the Council's local estate officers undertook weekly checks of properties and gardens in their areas and reported their findings to the ward Councillors.

It was pointed out that the Council's surveillance policy was currently under review, with the aim of engaging local residents more in the process. The Council was also considering whether to undertake any necessary works to gardens and to recharge the tenants accordingly.

Specific reference was made to a pilot scheme that the Council had introduced for void properties whereby the Property Improvement Officer checked that properties were secure, removed litter and rubbish from gardens, tended to flowerbeds and undertook painting, fencing, strimming and cutting grass to ensure that they were maintained to a high standard whilst empty. Members noted that it was hoped to extend the pilot scheme in the near future.

The Forum was then given details of the Council's Tenancy Enforcement Team that was based at the Council Offices in Spennymoor. The Team had achieved considerable success with regard to the issue of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, Evictions, Case Revolution and Mediation. It was noted that three people had recently been evicted in Newton Aycliffe for anti-social behaviour.

With regard to void properties, it was reported that at 13th October 2003, the Council had 148 void properties – 1.5% of its housing stock, which was one of the lowest levels within the region. It was noted that Government good practice recommended a level of 2%.

The Forum was given details of the new service standards that the Council had introduced in respect of its void properties and the reality checks that were undertaken.

It was reported that the Council was trying to improve its existing Decoration Voucher scheme by enabling tenants to exchange their vouchers both at local shops and B & Q.

Members of the Forum questioned whether tenants were recharged when they left a property in an unacceptable condition. It was explained that the Council did have a recharging policy, however, it was not as robust as it could be. The Council staffing structure was, however, being reviewed and it was intended that as part of the restructuring exercise to introduce a recovery team to deal with rechargeable repairs and former tenants' arrears.

The Chairman thanked Graham Scanlon for an interesting presentation.

AF(4).25/03 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 13th January 2004 at 6.30 p.m. in Shildon Sunnydale Leisure Centre.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Any person wishing to exercise the right of inspection, etc., in relation to these Minutes and associated papers should contact Gillian Garrigan , Spennymoor 816166, Ext. 4240